[A Merchant Wizard]

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LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: A MERCHANT WIZARD

Date of First Writing March 6, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed William M. Perry

Fictitious Name John Randall

Street Address 2200 Divine Street

Place Columbia, S. C.

Occupation Merchant

Name of Writer Stiles M. Scruggs

Name of Reviser State Office

John Randall was inspecting a sheet of figures from the auditing department of his firm when I entered his wholesale and retail electrical store at 1609-11 Main Street. I was shown to a seat and told I could see Mr. Randall shortly.

After he finished his inspection, and marked “O.K.” on the paper, he invited me to a chair by his desk. There I told him the object of my visit, and he courteously consented to the

request. Surrounding Mr. Randall's desk, on the second floor of the store, were thirty-six busy men and women. When I spoke of the inspiring business scene, he smiled and said: “Pretty fair scene to have started from an accidental shoe string.” [?] 1/31/41. South Carolina, Box, 2.

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Mr. Randall has a pleasing personality. He is six foot tall, weighs two hundred pounds, and is as trim and straight as a pine of the forest. His large head, brown hair and eyes, heavy jaw and chin indicate strength. When I spoke of his splendid appearance, he explained: “I have kept fit probably because I have always been active in the wide open spaces. I am called an expert pistol and rifle shot, and I am an instructor of the Columbia Police Department and the South Carolina State Patrol. I have also practiced for several years at the National Civilian Rifle Association, held every summer at Camp Perry, Ohio. In 1937, the National Judge there bestowed on me the rank of captain. Then the National Boy Scout trustees awarded me the Silver Beaver, one of their highest trophies, in recognition of my work for the Scouts here.

“Activity has kept me free of surplus fat from the start of my business life. And it looks as though activity for me might last to the end of the trail, for my interests, both socially and economically, appear to the increasing day by day. I do not mind that, however, for I have always had the idea that I would rather wear out than rust out.” By this time four or five persons had taken seats in the waiting room. Mr. Randall saw me glance at the visitors, and reassured me: “That sort of thing is a daily affair here; no need to hurry.”

The building which houses the Randall store is air conditioned, and Mr. Randall was literally stripped for action that day. He was clad in a fresh, clean white business shirt, with the collar unbuttoned and a four-in-hand tie hanging carelessly. His dark trousers were held up firmly by a leather belt with a silver buckle. His black oxford shoes completed the picture of the busy man who appeared entirely at ease. He picked up the real narrative on my original request and went along smoothly:

“I was born in 1872, on a farm near Cottageville, Colleton County, South Carolina. My parents were Newman K. Randall and Margaret (Heyward) Randall.

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They moved to Columbia in 1874, when I was two years old. Father came here as marshal at the University of South Carolina. During his seven years in that role, he won a law degree. In later years, he practiced law in Columbia. My first big thrill came when, at the age of four, I saw Hampton's Red Shirts fall into line and march to the State House in 1876. We lived close to the Wallace House at that time.

“My schooling was cut short during my youth, because of political discord and confused social conditions, and it took pretty earnest scratching to get by. I first became a pupil of the Clarkson Private School at 1118 Lady Street, and later finished the eighth grade in the public school, in 1883. That's the sum total of my schooling. One year when I was in Ohio, some friends asked me what college I had finished in. When I told them the truth, they were amazed. What education I have above the eighth grade has been acquired in the school of experience.

“In 1885, I got my first job as a clerk in R. C. Davis' Racket Store. There I worked two years, and then quit the Davis Racket House to take a job as wrapping clerk in the McCrory store at an increase in salary. I received five dollars a week when I started clerking, and when I quit clerking at the end of four years, I was not drawing over ten dollars a week.

“That low scale of pay probably caused me to devote my leisure hours searching for a better job. As luck would have it, I found it, and I began work for Uncle Sam as special delivery messenger in the Columbia Post Office in 1888. In 1890, I was promoted to the rank of letter carrier, and in 1906 I was superintendent of carriers. Still I was not prone to rest, even though the pay and the position were better than any I had ever drawn. I realized that there was not a very bright future in post office jobs.

“In 1890, I was elected chief engineer of steam engines in the volunteer fire department. That job paid me nothing, of course, but it put a better feeling in my heart to think that I was aiding in the public welfare, and it brought me good luck, too. In 1899, a disastrous fire destroyed the City Hall and the Police Station. I was living a mile from the fire station and did not know of the conflagration until next morning. This was a great disappointment to me, and I got busy looking for a remedy for that difficulty.

“I began to collect old wire and a bell, and with my own hands I strung that wire a mile to my house. During my work on the line, any number of people poked jokes at me. But I wasn't in doubt about the improvement, nor greatly disturbed at the taunts of the doubters. As soon as I finished construction work on that line, I had an alarm sounded at the fire station, and, when it went off, my alarm bell rang. I never missed another fire, and, strange enough, the very people who had taunted me about my alarm line came forward to congratulate me.

“In 1903, when the paid fire department was established, I declined membership, because I realized there was little chance of winning any big plums in professional fire fighting.

“Now came my chance to do something worth while, and I took it. In 1903, I quit the post office. The big reason for this was that I wished to build up a career in electrical work. The line that I had erected from the fire station to my home showed the people what could be done along this way, and I found more work than I could attend to, doing similar or kindred electric work for other folks.

“In the latter months of 1903, I was occupying a tiny room in a building 5 standing where the Arcade building now stands. I was paying three dollars a month rent and making nearly as much money as I had earned as superintendent of carriers at the post office. By 1904, I had formed an electrical company and rented quarters in the Berkley building. I was paying pretty fair wages to thirty-two men and women employees. You know that

prosperity and panic are so close together that the alternate currents come quickly and hit the average business man right between the eyes. In 1905, the economic dip gave me some sleepless nights, and if my creditors hadn't been lenient, I would have gone to the wall.

“But I weathered that storm and rode right along up the road until the bottom fell out of the economic barrel again in 1914. That year, the war in Europe caused a shut off to American exports. Business in the South collapsed, because there was no sale for our cotton, the chief money crop of the State. Collections were almost nil, and my business hovered between life and death for months. I slept little most of these nights, for I knew if I failed in 1914, all of my efforts would have been in vain.

“An economic panic is like an earthquake. It hits all alike. A business firm, particularly without a huge reserve to draw on, is bound to suffer. Up to 1915, my store had no reserve, and that is why we stood to lose all we had everytime the money stringency came along. In that year, 1915, I exerted myself and conferred with my friends, and I rode out of the storm. When we began to prosper again, I bought out the interest of M. L. Mann and began to put by a fund for emergencies. The reserve aided us wonderfully when periods of business slackness came along. And, I'm telling you, upsets in economic affairs are about as certain to happen over the years as death and taxes.

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“However, our reserve was soon exhausted when the so-called depression of 1929 hit the economic world right between the eyes. No wonder the business structure trembled in 1929 and kept shaking until 1932. When money takes a nose dive, and people got scared, the panic is on. And that's what happened. Our store was out on a limb again in 1932, and for some years following, because people who needed our supplies and could have paid for them were too frightened to buy, and the great rank and file of our customers were not financially able to buy what they needed.

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“It took many strong pulls to play even for some years, because our overhead expense was about the same and business was cut down to fifty percent. I prayed hard and worked hard in order to take care of my employees, but I had to let out a few. The other business houses also did the same thing, and that cut turned loose all the millions of unemployed in the United States. As 1935 dawned, however, my store was better stabilized, and I was able to re-employ those I had let out earlier, by taking a cut in profits all around.

“As the years sped along, and the Government earnestly strove to aid, our customers rallied, and we pressed on. In 1938, this store, which began in a cubbyhole approximately 40 years ago, and with a rental of three dollars a month, is occupying its own $12,000 building. It is paying thirty-six men and women good salaries, five of them $6,000 a year. My income for 1938 was $32,000, and I paid slightly more than $4,000 in Federal income taxes. I believe South Carolina has seen the worth of the depression, and our 1939 outlook, so far, gives us reason to hope that we may do more business this year than we did in 1938.

“At a mass meeting in Columbia, I was unanimously chosen president of 7 the United States Federal Relief Council in 1938, in Richland County. At that time, the man who put me in nomination paid me this tribute: 'Mr. Randall has administered more welfare programs in Richland County than any other man in it, and he has always served without pay.' Well, that statement may be true, because when I was a young man I decided never to be too busy with my own affairs to keep me from serving my community as a citizen. I served many years as a volunteer fireman, because I wished to aid my neighbors.

“It was love for my fellow man that motivated me to teach the Columbia police and State patrol how to use firearms. I mastered the shooting game myself, and I have shown others how I did it. When at the first practice, I put four out of five rifle shots in the bull's-eye, the police showed great interest; and when I took a revolver and put five out of six shots in the bull's-eye, the police and patrol boys cheered me. These officers are now far more expert

with firearms than they were when I started the instruction. But none of them yet excel the teacher, and they still salute me when I go down to shoot.

“The War Department pays the expenses of sharpshooters for two weeks at Camp Perry, Ohio, and I take a number of good shots there during the National Rifle Matches. I try out the applicants who wish to go to these matches, and if any one of them fails to put three out of every five shots in the bull's-eye, he doesn't make the grade. There is a great number of excellent sharpshooters at Camp Perry every year. I think it was my shooting and my interest, generally, in the events there that caused the board of trustees to bestow the title of captain on me. And it was my interest and work toward making the Boy Scouts organization in Columbia efficient for 8 boys that caused the National organization to honor me with the silver beaver trophy.

“For many years I have been a member of Good Shepherd Episcopal Church. I have served my church, at its request, as junior and senior warden. The title of senior warden is the highest rank bestowed by the church on a layman.

“I have also been active in Masonic and other fraternal organizations. I am a member of Blue Lodge; a Shriner in Masonry; a member of the Knights of Pythias, Odd Fellows, and Elks orders; and I give them much attention. I coach men who apply for membership and serve the orders in many other ways, particularly when they undertake to entertain state-wide delegations at conventions or conclaves in Columbia. Sometimes one must open his house to aid his fellows, and I have tried to do my share in that sort of aid, as well as devoting my time to the public.

“My domestic and social life,” continued Mr. Randall, “has been full and, for the most part, very happy. I was married to Miss Juanita Frost in 1890, at Wilmington, North Carolina. We had one son and five daughters. The son, John L. Randall, is now secretary and treasurer of this electrical store. The daughters are all married. Today I have nine grandchildren. Mrs. Randall died in 1930. In 1934, I was married a second time, to Mrs.

Guy Mason, of Columbia. We reside at 2200 Divine Street, Columbia. That is the first and only house I have ever owned or lived in since 1890, when I married the first time."

"Now that we are about to write finis to this bit of a tale, I trust a possible reader may realize that every oasis of success and every potato hill of pleasure in my life has been won by struggle, sweat and anxiety.

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The Lord told Adam, when he drove him from the garden of Eden: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread." I have held this message before me as I endeavored to stumble along. To have won a little success in a work-a-day world, which has been topsy-turvy a great deal of the time, is a great pleasure to me."